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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the choice of world history as a foundation course in the liberal arts college at Denison University, Ohio. It discusses why world history was chosen as a required course over the standard, introductory course, Western Civilization, compulsory in the 1960s. It also describes the kind and design of the world history course offered and discusses how well this course met its objectives. Specific objectives include to provide students with a wide, global view of the world to break down student parochialism; to acquaint students with aspects of western heritage; to have students analyze the interactions between major civilizations; and to introduce students to the discipline of history. This course is comprised of History 101 which treats world history from its origins to the 15th century, followed by History 102, which examines the period from the 15th century on. Team-taught by up to five staff members, the course format for the first and second semesters featured two or three large-lecture sessions per week coupled with a small-group discussion section. The reading materials consisted of assignments from a text, selections of appropriate documents, and an occasional novel or monograph. After the first semester, an evaluation showed that the course did not provide students with much intellectual satisfaction or generate much enthusiasm. The evaluations after the second semester identified various problems, for example, the mass lectures tended to alienate students and the single small-group discussion section per week was inadequate. Also students felt that there was a problem of balancing the breadth and depth of the content of the course. As a result of the formative evaluations, substantive changes in Denison's teaching of world history were implemented. For example, the courses were decentralized and more time was allocated to discussion. These efforts began to show results: the courses are now fully enrolled. (Author/NE)

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World History as a General Education Course at a Liberal Arts College

1981

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In the fall of 1980 the History Department of Denison University, a liberal arts college of approximately 2000 students, launched a two-semester world history course as a required component in the college-wide general education program which essentially introduces students to the various areas of liberal learning.[1] In determining its contribution to this program the History Department was primarily controlled by the question, "Since we can count absolutely on students taking just one history course, what should that course be?" Our answer, framed after a long period of discussion, was a course in world history. Why we arrived at that response, what kind of world history offerings we designed, and how well these offerings have met their objectives constitute the issues examined in this paper. An additional concern guides the discussion. While agreeing with William McNeill that "intrinsically, the task of finding intelligible order in the history of the world is no different from what historians confront in making national or any other kind of history intelligible," our experience suggests that the teaching of world history presents unique challenges, challenges not easily surmounted.[2]

McNeill and others have argued clearly and persuasively for world history as a foundation course in the liberal arts and within the history major.[3] During the 1960s the standard introductory course, western civilization, met its demise on most college campuses, the victim of

increasing specialization within departments and skepticism about the intellectual assumptions undergirding the course. Often the college history requirement vanished along with the required course in western civilization. Curricular fragmentation and declining enrollments followed. According to its advocates, the establishment of world history as a foundation course offers the possibility of reversing this debilitating decline and providing an intellectually coherent base on which to build a history program.

A second line of argument is also convincing. We live, and here it is difficult to avoid painfully obvious cliches, in a complex, interdependent, diverse, highly explosive world; yet, many American college students, as revealed by the recent Educational Testing Service survey of global knowledge, are woefully ignorant of global realities.[4] In this area especially our educational system inadequately prepares students to live in the world of the future. The challenge, according to Harlan Cleveland, is obvious, "Educators of the eighties and nineties are responsible for making sure that Americans enter the twenty-first century with a view as wide as the world. The implication is far-reaching: The widest and most neglected frontier of U.S. educational reform is no longer international studies. It is a global perspective on <u>all</u> studies."[5] (Italics his) The agenda is set and world history deserves a central role in meeting it.

At Denison we found these arguments compelling. We, like many other departments, had abandoned a required two-semester western civilization

sequence in the 1960s, replacing it with two more limited European history courses based on the theme, the individual and the social order. Two American offerings, American Civilization and A History of Blacks in America, were added as courses meeting the college general education requirement in history when Denison expanded its minority student population and faced a "crisis" over Black demands. This set of four courses, from which the student selected one to meet the college requirement, had been most successful in providing the department with strong, stable enrollments at a time when history was in trouble on many campuses. In the eyes of some in the department, however, the requirement package rested on political as much as intellectual foundations. Given the absence of necessity, the mother of many of the recent curricular inventions, the Denison History Department adopted world history for three primary reasons: 1) it was more intellectually defensible than our current requirement; 2) it spoke to the needs of our students as world citizens; 3) it offered the opportunity for a collaborative staff effort.[6] World history also represented a compromise within the department between those who looked with some nostalgia at the old western civilization experience and wished to move in that direction, and those favoring more emphasis on non-western history.

After several years of intermittent discussion the department finally came to closure on world history in the fall of 1979. In the spring semester we offered a pilot course in world history from 1500 and in the fall of 1980 instituted the full program based on the following objectives:

1) To acquaint students with definitive aspects of the western heritage.
2) To break down student parochialism by developing their understanding of and sensitivity to other major world civilizations.
3) To analyze the interactions between major civilizations and assess their consequences for world history.
4) To introduce students to the discipline of history and help them to understand its importance for their lives.
5) To develop student skills in comparative analysis, critical reading, clear thinking, and cogent writing.

These goals had to be realized in two separate courses, History 101 and 102, one of which the student would select to meet the requirement. The reasons for this arrangement are straightforward: 1) the politics of general education on the campus would not have allowed the department two required courses in the program; 2) assuming the maintenance of the department at eleven persons and the unwillingness of the department to jeopardize the major by allocating two-thirds of staff teaching time to world history, the department could only provide staffing for a requirement of one course; 3) the department desired to have relatively comprehensive offerings in world history, hence the History 101, 102 arrangment. History 101 treats world history from its origins to the 15th century, while 102 examines the period from the 15th century to the present.# History 101 is not a prerequisite for 102. Each course is team-taught by up to five staff members every semester. In any given year one-third of a staff

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See attached course syllabi for more specific indication of course content.

member's teaching load is devoted to world history.

Given the need to teach approximately 600 students a year in world history, without the aid of teaching assistants, and the desire to maximize the use of our colleagues' expertise, we adopted a course format featuring two or three large lecture sessions per week coupled with a small group discussion section of 15 to 20 students. Our reading material consisted of assignments from McNeill's text, A World History, selections of appropriate documents, and an occasional novel or monograph. As a result of the relative failure we experienced in the pilot course in using a large number of monographs, we attempted to keep most non-text reading short and highly focused. We often used carefully selected documentary materials. The discussion group was the setting in which these materials were to be thoroughly probed and related to the larger themes in the course. The requirement that students do six three-page papers on topics based on the reading further reinforced the importance of the reading material. In addition students took two hour examinations and a comprehensive final.

Our courses, as planned seemed rigorous and challenging, yet not beyond the abilities of our entering students. The mass lecture caused us some concern. After all students were not paying $8000. a year at Denison for mass education, yet there were compensations. New students would be introduced to various staff members, each lecturing in his/her area of relative specialization. The discussion groups, a necessary complement to the large lecture, allowed us to work on students' critical

reading and thinking skills, to familarize them with the nature of historical evidence, and to refine their ability to relate the specific to the general. The significant amount of writing in the courses would enhance writing ability and provide the occasion for comparative analysis. The examinations, essay in nature, also stressed the mastery of comparative skills. We felt, in short, our courses were soundly structured, well designed to meet our basic objectives. How successful were we?

The benefits to the staff, both collectively and individually, of our collaborative efforts in world history have been numerous. Our joint teaching ventures have, in the main, been stimulating and enjoyable. Conversation among the staff about topics treated in world history is continuous. We draw on one another's expertise, expanding our own understanding of fields new to us, but also developing insights into our areas of specialization thanks to the comparative perspective of world history. Several members of the department have commented on the difference world history has made to their teaching and research in their own fields. The common challenges of teaching world history have also drawn the department together, yet the program is not without its negatives. If the teaching of world history is a growth experience, it can also stretch one too thin. Some colleagues feel the cost not only in their more limited effectiveness in world history, but also in their other courses which suffer because of the demands of world history.[7]

If on balance the staff benefits have been decidedly positive, a similar judgment for students is considerably more problematic. Table 1 presents key results from a comprehensive student evaluation done in History 101 and 102 after the first semester of the program. With three (3) representing an undecided response to the questions, five (5) a strongly affirmative response, and one (1) the reverse, the figures in the right hand column provide a useful summary of student judgments. To place these figures in proper perspective, I should point out that the number of respondents for 101 was 85 and for 102 was 130, this out of a total enrollment in each of 101 and 192 respectively. This means that on the day this evaluation was completed only 73% of the students were in attendance, itself a negative indicator. One can reasonably conclude that those present were, in general, more engaged in and therefore more positive about the courses. A set of evaluations from all students would undoubtedly paint a more negative picture than that produced here.

It is clear from the responses to question 1 that while students were not wildly enthusiastic about taking these courses, they were, as a group, not negatively predisposed. The courses were not generally successful in building on this initial orientation. While the courses seemed to have reasonably clear objectives and to challenge students to think (question 4 and 5), they did not provide students with much intellectual satisfaction or generate enthusiasm for the courses. We found the responses to questions 2, 5, 6, and 7 particularly distressing from a departmental point of view. It has been our experience that this student generation

does not arrive at college enamored with history or inclined to pursue it for its vocational benefits, so the department's future is very direccly tied to the success and attractiveness of its general education courses. If world history developed a bad reputation among students, that would soon begin to have serious repercussions on our upper-level courses and majors. Understandably, History 101 fared consistently more poorly than History 102 in these evaluations. History 102 had the benefit of the pilot course the previous semester and of working within a more manageable time frame.

The results of this evaluation were reinforced by second semester enrollments in world history. Of 270 spaces offered in world history sections only 193 were filled. We also observed that many students came to world history only after getting closed out of "more desireable" courses. Despite some course alterations, especially in History 101, this enrollment pattern continued during spring pre-registration for the first semester of 1981-1982. Not only was world history undersubscribed, but we were also beginning to see an impact on our upper-level courses which in several instances were much smaller than usual. Although world history was a requirement, students were clearly putting it off to their sophomore or junior years with consequent impact on our advanced courses. What, then, were the problems with world history?

The evaluations indicated that for a substantial minority of students the mass lecture was an alienating experience. As one student stated of 101, the smaller of the two courses, "This class is way too big. It seems like an impersonal OSU class with a hundred people." Students

found it virtually impossible to raise questions during the lectures, while the lecturers in turn found it difficult to develop much rapport with the students in this setting or to sense when points were not being grasped. Further, student skill in effective listening and note-taking was not always highly developed. Given the other demands of the course, this was not a problem we had time to address with much success. It is also the case that not all staff members proved to be wonderful lecturers. A special combination of rich and stimulating content, clear organization and presentation, and flair in delivery creates a successful mass lecture. Not all of us were able to marshal these attributes when we appeared on stage. These factors interacted to lessen significantly the students' commitment to the lectures. While attendance held up quite well in most discussion sections, absence from lectures was, at times, a noticeable problem.

The single small-group discussion section per week was simply inadequate to fulfill its purposes in the course. If the lectures for a given week were complex or somewhat weak, one could easily spend most of the class period clarifying points of confusion. This left little opportunity to work with the reading material, let alone to pursue the more stimulating questions of interpretation and evaluation. The danger existed that average or weak students felt they had not gotten all their questions answered while able students, who grasped the material initially, were bored and frustrated by the failure of the discussion to probe the issues more deeply.

The structural problem of the imbalance between lecture and discussion was linked to the content problem of balancing breadth and depth. In designing our world history courses we had concluded that any effort at systematic coverage was suicidal. Coverage in this context would reduce history to chronical. Yet, we did desire to provide students with a sense of change over time and a meaningful encounter with the major world civilizations. We felt torn by the conflicting demands of breadth and depth. This problem is, of course, present in any course we teach, but it is exacerbated in world history where so many subjects legitimately vie for attention. Many students felt we had not achieved a satisfactory balance.

> The course is much too broad, too much material to cover in a semester without getting the sense of just general knowing about what would seem to be complex civilizations.

> Basically, I think the problem is that you are trying to cram too much material into a semester. Maybe if you cut the time period, or didn't concentrate on the whole world. I don't know how you'd do that, but it seems to me that there is just too much to be covered in one semester...

These comments, typical of student responses to both 101 and 102 although the problem was more acute in the former case, reinforced similar staff concerns. We, too, were often uncomfortable with the broad level of generalization at which we functioned and were fearful that students were leaving the course with a very superficial understanding of both concepts and specific material. Our concerns were not eased by such occasional student observations as, "It (History 102) reminds me of a high school course where you retain very little knowledge," or by the staff's sharing of the "atrocity of the week," that student misperception most appalling to our historical sensibilities.[8]

From an intellectual perspective the opportunity to develop a genuinely comparative course is a major virtue of world history. While the historical examination of the major world civilizations has merit, if this were the extent of world history, the approach would not be worth the effort. The task of comparison in world history injects intellectual challenge and stimulation. Identifying and understanding the key variables which shape and alter a civilization over time and delineating the determinants which cause one civilization to differ from another give analytical rigor to what could be essentially a descriptive course. The task of comparison, however, has not proved an easy one for our students. In History 101, for example, students have had to develop a sound understanding of three or four major civilized traditions, all of which are alien to their experience. This alone can be difficult particularly if the course moves rapidly from one to another and attempts to provide some historical continuity. In addition, the students, with the aid of the instructors, must construct and master meaningful comparative themes and categories in order for the comparative exercise to have any chance of success. Not surprisingly, students, especially at the introductory level, find this a hard and frustrating process while instructors feel discouraged by their lack of success.

Two final categories of concern have not been especially identified by students but are troublesome to members of the department. World history courses, to be worthy of the appellation, must give serious attention to the non-west. To see world history as essentially the

product of western action in the world arena or to focus attention on Europe with only occasional references to other regions simply will not do. Yet, even when the non-west (the concept itself is an indication of eurocentrism) is approached on its own terms and not as a foil for the west there are difficulties. In History 102, for example, despite our efforts to understand the strengths and virtues of non-western societies, it is all too easy for students to fall into the trap of thinking that the path of modernization as blazed by the west was preordained, logical, and right. In contrast to the "dynamic west," the non-west is viewed as "static and backward," needing the challenge of the "progressive" west in order to change. This perspective is not avoided in some world history texts.[9]

The conceptual and value problems raised by world history are accompanied by special difficulties for the faculty teaching in the course. World history takes all of us outside our fields to some degree and some of us, the American historians, almost completely away from our area of expertise. At a liberal arts college, of course, we are used to being generalists, yet even in this context world history demands perhaps too much. While all of us can function in courses in which we lack expertise, such a situation is not conducive to quality teaching. In world history, however, we have been operating in that fashion in segments of the course with some negative consequences. In our own fields we can help students understand the utility as well as the limitations of facile generalizations, we can make meaningful connections between specific

examples and general points and we can draw on new, but related, material to illustrate a complex point. Operating outside our areas of expertise all these tasks become more difficult, perhaps even presupposing a level of knowledge which we lack. Thus, we may not be well-equipped to fulfill our role as teachers in the context of world history.

The problems identified in this discussion resulted in a number of substantive changes in Denison's teaching of world history. First, to address the inadequacies of the large lecture, single discussion format, we decentralized the courses and allocated more time to discussion. The typical world history course now features a single lecture and two discussion meetings per week for each student. At this point, although it is still too early for definitive judgments, we seem to be more effective in handling the material and creating student involvement in and commitment to History 101 and 102. Instructors feel that they are able to build more substantial student/teacher relationships, a plus in a department generally noted for its ability to work well with students. A pattern has emerged of two instructors cooperating in the teaching of world history. They work with the same syllabus, share responsibility for the one common lecture a week, jointly plan paper topics and examination questions, but each teaches his/her own discussion sections. While there are departmentally determined goals and guidelines for each course, the instructors have considerable latitude to design the course to utilize their special strengths.

The experience of our first year of world history plus the decentralization contributed to several changes in the required reading, including a shift from McNeill, A World History, to L.S. Stavrianos, The World Since 1500: A Global History, as the basic text in History 102, and to two longer papers rather than the six short papers. The latter requirement had produced the "short paper syndrome"--grading fatigue among the staff, student frustration when grades did not improve, and frequent dissatisfaction with the students' inability to move much beyond generalization within the three-page limit.

Second, instructors further reduced coverage in order to provide additional time for more systematic treatment of selected themes and regions. At the same time a conscious effort was made to sharpen the comparative aspects of the courses. The limitation on coverage facilitated that process to some degree. While we sense that these alterations have strengthened our world history courses, the problems of balancing depth and breadth and of doing meaningful comparative work are by no means solved. One wonders whether satisfactory solutions for these problems exist if world history is taught at the introductory level.

As historians we are presumably open to the lessons of the past. The Denison experience with world history has, to date, been mixed. The staff has benefited from the collaborative effort and, in the main, been intellectually stimulated by the challenges of teaching world history. We have, however, been disappointed that the fruits of our labors taste more bitter than sweet. To be sure there are measures we should have

adopted prior to the full-fledged introduction of world history. The entire staff should have engaged in a summer reading and study program in world history to better prepare us for the demands of the program. Such activity presupposes institutional support as well as the willingness of faculty members to take time from their on-going research and teaching projects to enhance their expertise as teachers of world history. Pilot courses in both 101 and 102, and not just the latter, should have been offered in the spring of 1980. Had this been done, some of the problems of History 101 could have been avoided.

Yet it appears that, although we were not always wise in our venture into world history, our efforts are beginning to have some results. Pre-registration figures for second semester courses reveal a fully enrolled complement of world history courses with a sizeable waiting list and solid enrollments in our advanced courses. The department is not overly optimistic, however. We realize there are still significant, perhaps intractable, problems with world history as an introductory, general education course, and we see the development of world history as a process in need of continuing attention and care.[10]

Table 1: Student Evaluation of History 101 and 102, 1st Semester 1980-81.

SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, U=Undecided, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree

Question	Course	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
1. I had a strong desire to take this course.	101	12	26	25	14	8	3.24
	102	17	41	39	25	8	3.26
2. This course motivates me to take additional courses.	101	4	14	23	26	18	2.53
	102	16	45	37	19	10	3.15
3. This course has been intellectually fulfilling for me.	101	8	26	26	20	4	3.17
	102	11	70	29	17	3	3.53
4. This course has effectively challenged me to think.	101	8	50	16	9	2	3.62
	102	30	70	19	9	1	3.92
5. This course has clearly stated objectives.	101	12	32	23	13	5	3.39
	102	21	78	17	11	2	3.81
6. I highly recommend this course.	101	9	13	27	21	16	2.74
	102	17	53	36	16	7	3.44
7. Overall, this course is among the best I have ever had.	101	3	9	18	27	25	2.24
	102	10	32	38	36	14	2.91

END NOTES

[1]The history department at Denison consists of eleven full-time members including historians of the Middle East and East Asia. The general education program, once inter-disciplinary, has become basically a distributional program with designated courses taken in a variety of departments. The program rests on the following assumption: "A life based on rational and humane self-determination, to which all liberal education aspires, requires those skills and understandings of ideas, principles, and methods most common to the major realms of modern knowledge." Denison University College Catalogue, 1981-83, p. 6.

[2]"History for Citizens," AHA Newsletter, March 1976, p. 5.

[3]Ibid., pp. 4-6. Also Marvin Lunenfeld, "World Enough and Time: A Flexible Approach to the Modern Global History Survey," AHA Newsletter, February 1981, pp. 13-14; Neil J. O'Connell, "Toward a World History," AHA Newsletter, May/June 1978, pp. 7-8; Robert E. Roeder, "The Twentieth Century World: An Experience in Course Development," AHA Newsletter, 1979, pp.6-7.

[4]Thomas Barrows, John Clark, Stephan Klein, "What Students Know About Their World," Change, May/June 1980,pp. 10-17. This piece reports on the results of the survey and notes that the mean score of all college seniors was 50.5. History majors scored the highest at 59.3 while education majors fared the worst at 39.8.

[5]"Forward to Basics: Education as Wide as the World," Change, May/June 1980, p. 19. This whole issue of Change deals with the need for more effective global education.

[6]Members of the history department at Denison who had taught in the old western civilization sequence reported on the values of that collaborative effort for staff morale and interaction. They sensed that something important had been lost when the commonality of that experience disappeared. Staff relations were strong as we entered into the world history experiment, but newer staff members were also eager for the opportunity to work more intensively with their colleagues.

[7]Staff members spend one-third of their teaching time in world history; however, the demands of the course in terms of grading and preparation have seemed excessive to several staff members. Granted that extra time is always needed as a course begins to establish itself, but it is also true that world history is a special case. Another minor problem with negative consequences for the chairperson is course scheduling. The need to staff world history creates special headaches for this person.

[8]The "atrocity of the week" is a form of black humor which reminds us of the gap between what we believe we are teaching and what some students have actually learned. It also serves to remind us that we often assume a basic level of knowledge on the part of our students that just is not there. Some examples: "Confucius, the famous Greek general." Exodus, the story of the Greek's explusion from Egypt." "Hare Krishna, the founder of Islam." "Who is this guy, Allah?" "Why don't the Greeks look

look more oriental?" asked a student who confused Turkey with Japan. After a colleague, a European historian, had noted how unusual it was that China, unlike Europe, should be ruled by scholar-officials and not a military elite, a student offered the explanation that "the Chinese were not militaristic because they were short."

[9]L. S. Stavrianos, The World Since 1500: A Global History (Englewood Cliffs: Prentic-Hall, Inc., 1975, 3rd edition), does not avoid this orientation. See,for example, page 29 where he writes of China, "In ordinary times such order and permanence would be considered a blessing. But these were the centuries that witnessed the rise of a new and dynamic Europe-.... In such a period, stability became a curse rather than a blessing. China appeared, and in fact was, relatively speaking static and backward."

[10]In fact as I write this paper the department is considering the possibility of ending the 101, 102 division and offering all our world history courses under a History 100 number. Considerable flexibility would be allowed to the instructors of each world history course within a set of broad guidelines which would require the comparative treatment of several world civilizations over time in both the pre-modern and modern eras.